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ABSTRACT

Two epic poems from India, "The Mahabharata" and "The Ramayana" have endured for more than 2,000 years as important parts of Indian culture, and the study of these epics can yield insights into Indian life and religion. This paper contains a list of the major characters and an explanation of the major themes in both books. The themes include good and evil and the value of integrity, fidelity, education, duty, commitment, and achievement. Two classroom activities are provided, along with study questions for each epic and questions about the joint themes. Information on how to obtain copies of the epics is included. (DJC)

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Teaching about Indian culture through its epic literature: THE MAHABHARATA and THE RAMAYANA.

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Introduction:

The two great epics of Indian literature, THE RAMAYANA and THE MAHABHARATA, have endured for more than 2000 years as an important part of Indian culture. As do THE ILIAD and THE ODYSSEY of ancient Greece, these epics contain a tremendous wealth of information about numerous important questions one faces in life, including issues related to proper conduct, marriage, integrity, religion, family, and death. Study of these epics yields interesting insights into the ways of life of Indians today.

List of major characters in THE MAHABHARATA and THE RAMAYANA:

Many Western students encounter considerable difficulty with pronouncing and remembering the names of characters in these epics. It would be helpful to provide the students with a list of the major characters which they can refer to in class and during their reading. R.K. Narayan provides a list in both of his books.

A brief list of major characters follows:

THE MAHABHARATA

The Pandava Princes:
YUDHISHTIRA (the eldest)
ARJUNA
BHIMA
NAKULA the
SAHADEVA twins

KUNTHI, mother of the Pandava Princes
VIDURA, Uncle to the Pandava Princes

DURYODHANA, cousin of the Pandavas, one of the one hundred Kaurava brothers

BHISHMA, Uncle to both the Pandavas and the Kauravas

DHRITARASHTRA, blind father of the Kauravas

DRONA, Brahmin who was skilled in use of arms and who trained the Pandavas
ASWATHAMA, his son

EKALAVYA, non-Aryan prince who revered Drona for his skill

DRUPADA, King of Panchala and childhood friend of Drona
DRAUPADI, his daughter and wife of the Pandava Princes

KRISHNA, eighth incaranation of Vishnu (assisted Arjuna in battle against the Kauravas)

BAKASURA, a demon

THE RAMAYANA

DASARATHA, King of Ayodhya

RAMA	three of
BHARATA	his
LAXSHMANA	sons

KAUSALYA, wife of DASARATHA and mother of RAMA
KAIKEYI, wife of DASARATHA and mother of BHARATA
SUMITHRA, wife of DASARATHA and mother of LAXSHMANA

MANTARA, Kaikeyi's housemaid

VISWAMITHRA, teacher of RAMA and LAXSHMANA

SITA, wife of RAMA

JATAYU, eagle king (vulture king in some versions)

RAVANA, king of Lanka
SHOORPANAKA, his sister
MAREECHA, Ravana's uncle
VIBISHANA, Ravana's brother
KUMBAKARNA, Ravana's brother
MEGHNAD, Ravana's son

SUGREEVA, ruler of monkey kingdom (in exile at the beginning of the story)
HANUMAN, his chief minister
VALI, Sugreeva's brother

Major themes in THE RAMAYANA and THE MAHABHARATA:

The following is provided to assist teachers who wish to emphasize important themes in these epics, especially those with relevance to Indian culture today.

(1) GOOD PREVAILS OVER EVIL. Since humans are intelligent creatures, they possess the power to judge right and wrong and, thus, a responsibility for the way they conduct their lives. Yet no human in any of the epics is completely evil, to the exclusion of any good. In THE MAHABHARATA, the Kauravas are not inherently bad, yet many of their actions (the insulting of Draupadi, deceiving the Pandavas with a palace of lac and jute, attempting to kill Bheeshma) are evil. Like Ravana in THE RAMAYANA, the Kauravas follow religious customs (Ravana prayed to Shiva for his extraordinary powers). Yet as the Pandavas prevail in THE MAHABHARATA, Rama prevails in THE RAMAYANA. Within this, there is a lesson of optimism that gives hope to the reader: that good will ultimately prevail over evil in the world, and that through one's individual actions, one can promote the good of society. This is an important value in Indian society.

(2) WHAT IS GOOD AND WHAT IS EVIL. Each epic teaches moral lessons by dicussing which human actions are evil and which are good. In THE MAHABHARATA, gambling is treated as an undesirable activity -- the reader is taught that the potential consequences are substantial. In both epics, adultery is regarded as a serious evil. Both Kichaka in THE MAHABHARATA and Ravana in THE RAMAYANA die because of this. The Bhagavad-Gita (in THE MAHABHARATA) teaches that worldly possessions and desires are evil, yet also teaches what a virtuous person must do. Deception (practiced, for example, by Ravana) is considered evil. Honor, duty, loyalty to family, are a few of the values taught in these epics.

(3) LOYALTY TO PARENTS. In THE RAMAYANA, Rama gives up a kingdom for fourteen years in exile to abide by a promise made by his father to one of his father's wives. In THE MAHABHARATA, Arjuna's mother Kunti unwittingly declares that whatever Arjuna brought from Draupada's palace must be shared among his brothers. Arjuna had returned with Draupadi, won at her swayamvara, whom Arjuna insisted on sharing in order to abide by his mother's command. The strength of family solidarity remains important in India. It is a form of security for individual Indians amid difficult economic and emotional crises. Approximately 95% of all marriages in India are arranged by parents. This tradition endures largely because of the faith Indians have in the wisdom of their parents to make the most successful matches.

(4) THE IMPORTANCE OF A WOMAN'S INTEGRITY. In THE MAHABHARATA, the God Krishna rescues Draupadi as she is being insulted by the Kauravas. Later, Draupadi spurns the advances of Kichaka. In THE RAMAYANA, Vali is conquered by Rama because, in part, he stole his brother Sugreeva's wife. When Rama sees Sita for the first time after her lengthy

captivity, he questions her integrity. In response, Sita requests a fire and walks into the flames -- her integrity is confirmed when Agni, the god of fire, rises and delivers her, unharmed, to Rama. The moral lesson of integrity in marriage is taught through these stories and is seen as an important cultural value today.

A related value is (5) LOYALTY IN MARRIAGE. Throughout THE RAMAYANA, Rama and Sita remain loyal to each other -- a model for an ideal marriage. At the beginning of this story, there is a story (taught as a moral lesson to Rama) of Gautama and Ahalya which teaches marital loyalty.

In medieval India, some women (generally those in wealthier classes) would engage in the practice of "sati," or self-immolation on the funeral pyres of their husbands. "Sati" means "virtuous woman," indicating a woman's loyalty to her husband. "Sati" was declared illegal by the British and remains illegal today. Nevertheless, on very rare occasions a woman chooses to become a "sati" and is often deified posthumously within her village.

All of these illustrate how important fidelity in marriage is regarded in India. These stories, known by most Indians, serve to encourage fidelity and integrity.

(6) EDUCATION AND INITIATION INTO SOCIETY. In THE RAMAYANA, Rama spends part of his youth with the sage Viswamithra who teaches him moral lessons and skills to use when facing challenges. Arjuna is taught military skills by Drona and is later taught important moral lessons by Krishna (in Bhagavad-Gita). These illustrate the value of education (compare with Telemakhos in Homer's THE ODYSSEY). Both a respect for educators and a respect for education are stressed here.

(7) EXILE. In both epics, the wilderness is the place where the heroes are forced to live for fourteen years. Rama places himself in exile to fulfill his father's promise. The Pandavas are forced into the wilderness to repay a gambling debt. The wilderness is a place where demons reside, yet within this environment the heroes of these epics find beauty and greater spiritual understanding. (Compare with the usurped duke's speech in Shakespeare's AS YOU LIKE IT: "Sweet are the uses of adversity.") Indians may not view the wilderness in the same way as the American philosophers Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson, but these epics teach a message here of learning through quiet reflection undisturbed by extraneous information.

(8) DUTY AND COMMITMENT TO ONE'S OWN WORD. That each person should do his own duty in life is an important part of Indian values. A promise made is inviolate; it becomes a part of one's duty. In THE MAHABHARATA, the name Bhishma means "one of firm vow" because Bhishma promised to never marry so his father could remarry. Also in this epic, Drupada breaks his promise to help his childhood friend Drona. For this, Drona promises revenge, which he gains after great efforts

to train the Pandava Princes to help him. Krishna discusses duty with Arjuna before battle (in Bhagavad-Gita) In THE RAMAYANA, Rama, at great cost, abides by the promise his father made to the mother of his half-brother Bharata.

Religious duty is also stressed throughout both epics. Preparing a proper sacrifice (yagna), regular prayer to gods, and other rituals are stressed as an essential part of any human's life. Through prayer, Draupadi earned an endless sari and Ravana won many magical powers.

(9) EXCELLENCE. The extraordinary archery of Drona and Arjuna in THE MAHABHARATA and Rama in THE RAMAYANA are examples of the importance of excellence in a skill. Using archery as a model, these examples serve as lessons to encourage perseverance of practice in pursuit of any expertise, physical or mental. Compare with the archery in THE ODYSSEY.

(10) HEROISM AND NOBILITY. The meanings of these values emerge in both epics. In THE RAMAYANA, Rama is the exemplar possessing these qualities. Loyalty and integrity are more important values than selfishness. A major point of the Bhagavad-Gita is rid oneself of selfishness and live a life devoted to greater values.

Suggestions for classroom activities:

(1) Have students act out one of the epics, or a portion of one epic, as a play. It may even be possible to assign a character to each student and ask each to write lines for his/her character. Then have the students form small groups, one for each scene, to put together a script. This play could be performed for the school, parents, etc.

(2) Have the students compare and contrast Indian culture as represented in these epics with their own culture. Ask them to keep a journal or post a classroom chart that could be added to as you read the story. Compare with characters in modern literature, movies or other popular culture. Remember to stress the similarities as well as the differences.

Study Questions
THE RAMAYANA

1) What is a "swayamvara"?

2) What was necessary to win the hand of Sita in marriage?

3) What were the two wishes of Bharata's mother, Kaikeyi?

   1.

   2.

4) How was Kaikeyi persuaded to make these wishes?

5) Why did Dasaratha abide by these wishes?

6) How did Bharata feel about Kaikeyi's wishes, and what symbolic act of his made it possible for Rama to be king?

7) Who was king of the demons?

8) How was this king, anatomically speaking, different from the average human?

9) What special power did demons have?

10) What part did a vulture (eagle in some versions) play in the Ramayana?

11) In Lanka, how did Ravana attempt to torture Hanuman and how did Hanuman escape?

12) How did Rama treat an enemy king's brother who sought asylum?

13) Why couldn't Ravana be killed by beheading?

14) What special powers did Hanuman have?

15) What are two major themes (or morals) in THE RAMAYANA?

   1.

   2.

Study Questions
THE MAHABHARATA

1) What were the names of the two rival families in this epic?

2) Why did Bheema survive the evil plot organized by the Kauravas at the beginning of the story?

3) How did Drona retrieve the ball from the well?

4) How were Arjuna and Karna related?

5) Who was Vidura?

6) What was Purochana's palace made of, and how did the Pandava Princes escape it?

7) What was Drona's particular expertise?

8) How did Nakula's and Sahadeva's mother, Madri, die?

9) Who was Bakasura and what were the terms he required of the people of Ekachakrapura? What Greek myth is similar to this story?

10) Describe the test required of the successful applicant for Draupadi's hand in marriage.

11) What deity did the Pandavas worship?

12) Why did Draupadi have to marry all five of the Pandava Princes?

13) How was Draupadi insulted?

14) What is the Bhagavad-Gita?

15) What was the setting of the Bhagavad-Gita?

16) What did Lord Krishna say to Arjuna at this scene?

Questions on themes in THE RAMAYANA and THE MAHABHARATA:

1) What is the most important message of the Bhagavad-Gita? How does it explain the definition of body and soul and how one should decide one's actions in life?

2) Describe three major themes of THE RAMAYANA. Give examples from THE RAMAYANA where they are stressed and discuss their importance (or lack of importance) today.

3) For what reasons do people choose to become sanyasis? How do sanyasis live their lives? Do you think their existence is justified? Why or why not?

4) Describe four methods used by the Kauravas to attempt to kill or humiliate individual Pandavas or the brothers as a whole.

5) Give five examples of trickery or deception in THE RAMAYANA and THE MAHABHARATA. For each example defend your view of whether this deception was justified.

How to obtain copies of THE MAHABHARATA and THE RAMAYANA useful to classroom teachers:

As with the epic literature of many cultures, many versions of THE RAMAYANA and THE MAHABHARATA exist, even though the main story and principal events remain the same in each. While the comprehensive verse translations are of great interest to the scholar, most classroom teachers would find them too detailed for practical use in a junior high school or even a high school curriculum. Fortunately, there are concise prose versions of each epic, from which extensive portions could be assigned or read by the teacher in class. Some suggestions include:

Narayan, R.K. THE RAMAYANA. New York: Viking Press, 1972 This volume is also available in an inexpensive Penguin volume. Mr. Narayan's version is taken from the verse interpretation of Tamil poet Kamban. It is a fascinating retelling of this story.

Narayan, R.K. THE MAHABHARATA. New York: Viking Press, 1978. This volume is published in paperback by Vision Books, 36C Connaught Place, New Delhi 110 001. Order from the publisher or from Nalanda Books or U.S.E.F.I. (addresses below).

Buck, William. RAMAYANA. Berkeley: UC Press, 1976.

Smith, H. Daniel. THE PICTUREBOOK RAMAYANA: AN ILLUSTRATED VERSION OF VALMIKI'S STORY. Syracuse, NY: Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, Syracuse University, 1981. This book has a concise but excellent synopsis of the story which could easily be read to students. It also contains selected verses accompanied by drawings.

Rajagopalachari, C. RAMAYANA. Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1986.

Rajagopalachari, C. MAHABHARATA. Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1986.

Coomaraswamy, Ananda K., and Sister Nivedita, MYTHS OF THE HINDUS AND BUDDHISTS. New York: Dover Publications, 1967.

One of the best ways to introduce students, especially those in junior high school, to these epics is through the Amar Chitra Katha series of books, illustrated in a style commonly referred to in the US as "comic" books. Students usually enjoy this format, yet they learn the basic outlines of each story; a teacher can supplement with readings in class from prose or verse renditions. The Amar Chitra Katha series is extensive and covers a wide range of Indian literature, mythology, and history. Each copy, however, is inexpensive (Rs 5, about $0.40). For the RAMAYANA, order the issue entitled "Rama," although a more

complete version entitled "Ramayana" can be ordered for about Rs 12 per copy. Amar Chitra Katha publishes a one volume edition of THE MAHABHARATA, but the breadth of this epic makes this abridgement too cursory a treatment. "The Pandava Princes" is a good way to introduce students to THE MAHABHARATA, and Amar Chitra Katha publishes many other books covering other parts of the story, e.g. "Drona," "The Gita." This publisher is currently producing a multi-volume series of THE MAHABHARATA.

Amar Chitra Katha catalogs and books can be ordered in the US from:

M/S Adman's Enterprises Inc.
Empire State Building
350 5th Avenue, Suite 730
New York, NY 10118
(212) 279-0120

or

Famous Overseas Corporation
45-15 Barnett Avenue
Long Island City, NY 11104

You may also order Amar Chitra Katha less expensively from the addresses in India listed below. Please keep in mind, however, that shipping by economical sea mail takes several months. Upon receiving your order, these booksellers will send you a "pro forma" invoice indicating the cost, including shipping, for your order. They will then send your order upon receipt of payment.

R. Alvares
Nalanda Book and Record Shop
Shopping Centre, The Taj Inter-Continental,
Apollo Bunder, Bombay 400 039 India
Telephone: 202 2514

or

India Book House
Fleet Building
Marol Naka, Andheri-East,
Bombay 400 059 India

Any of the books listed in this bibliography that are published in India can most likely be ordered from the Nalanda Book and Record Shop in Bombay. Teachers may also write to the following address for assistance in ordering books published in India:

United States Educational Foundation in India
Fulbright House
12 Hailey Road
New Delhi 110001 India

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